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Iran's Role in Iraq

Room for U.S.-Iran Cooperation?

Alireza Nader

The rise of Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) has led to arguments in favor of U.S.-Iran cooperation in combating the group, as immediate American and Iranian interests in Iraq are very similar: Both countries view ISIL and the broader Sunni jihadi movement as major threats to their national interests. American and Iranian military forces in Iraq are fighting the same enemy and, on the surface, U.S. air power seems to complement Iran's on-the-ground presence in Iraq. While the United States and Iran ultimately have divergent long-term goals for Iraq, and face disagreements on many other issues, limited tactical cooperation in weakening ISIL in Iraq may be possible.

This paper examines Iranian objectives and influence in Iraq in light of ISIL's ascendance. In particular, the paper focuses on Iran's ties with Iraqi Shi'a parties and militias and the implications of Iran's sectarian policies for U.S. interests. In addition, the paper examines the role of specific Iranian actors in Iraq, especially the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, the clergy, and the government of President Hassan Rouhani. Finally, the paper concludes with policy recommendations for the United States.

The rise of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) is a threat and an opportunity for the Islamic Republic of Iran. ISIL is defined by its vehement enmity toward the Shi'a, perhaps more so than any other Sunni jihadi group.

The Iranian government—the primary champion of the world's Shi'a and an obstacle to Sunni jihadi ascendancy in the Middle East—is one of ISIL's biggest enemies. ISIL's conquest of nearly one-third of Iraq and its ability to threaten Baghdad pose a direct threat to Iranian interests. The Shi'a-led central government in Baghdad is aligned with, if not beholden to, Tehran. Additionally, two of Shi'a Islam's holiest sites—located in Najaf and Karbala—are close to ISIL-held territory. It is therefore no surprise that Iran has mobilized allied Shi'a Iraqi militias and has taken a prominent and public role in leading the Iraqi campaign against ISIL.

At the same time, ISIL's ascent gives Tehran the chance to showcase its importance and influence in the Middle East. The Iranian government's anti-ISIL campaign is a reminder to Iraqis that

their larger neighbor is the most powerful actor in their country, perhaps more so than the United States or any Arab country. Iran's role in Iraq is also a direct rebuke to Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and other Sunni states vying with Iran for power in the Middle East.

Moreover, Tehran would like to remind the rest of the world, especially major powers such as China, Russia, and the European Union, that the Islamic Republic is a key player in maintaining (or disrupting) regional stability. This not only helps Iran diminish its international isolation, but could also increase its leverage on nuclear negotiations with the P5+1 (China, France, Germany, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States).

Iraq holds an important place in Iran's revolutionary psyche; Iran's current policies toward its neighbor are still shaped by the destructive war with Iraq following the 1979 Iranian Revolution. The Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988)—described as the “Holy Defense” by Iranian officials—was a pivotal event for the Islamic Republic. Not only did it cement the nascent regime, but it has often been presented by the Iranian regime as an example of the zeal and sacrifice required to preserve the revolution. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), responsible for guarding the Islamic Republic, bases much of its current legitimacy—and its extensive political and economic power—on its “defense” of the revolution during the war (Wehrey et al., 2009). Guardsmen such as Qassem Soleimani, head of the specialized Qods Force and Iran's mastermind in Iraq and Syria, were profoundly shaped by their personal experiences during the war.

Iran did not win the war with Iraq, but instead suffered immense physical destruction and the loss of countless lives. Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini chose to drink the “poisoned chalice” and accepted the United Nations–brokered

ceasefire between the two countries. The 2003 overthrow of Saddam Hussein by U.S. forces and the subsequent ascent of Shi'a parties and militias in Iraq were viewed by many of the Iranian elite as vindication for their revolutionary sacrifices. After all, many of Iraq's new rulers, including those belonging to the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI), the Badr Brigades, and elements of Dawa had fought alongside the IRGC during the war with Saddam. Iran may have not defeated Saddam in conventional warfare, but, in a way, it had achieved one of its major goals: the empowerment of the Iraqi Shi'a. The recapture of Tikrit, Saddam's hometown, by Iranian-allied forces may have provided great satisfaction for the Iranian government.

Nevertheless, Iraq's Shi'a-led government does not resemble the Iranian theocracy. Iraq's leading Shi'a clerics, especially the Iranian-born Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani, are wary of Iran's *velayat-e faghih* (rule of the supreme jurisprudence). Moreover, many Iraqis, including the Shi'a, fear Persian domination of their country. Iran's increasing influence in Iraq could lead Iraqis, including the Shi'a, to counter Iranian influence in Iraq. In essence, a unified Iraq, even under Shi'a-majority rule, would not necessarily become a vassal of neighboring Iran. But Iraq's sectarian politics, its endemic instability, and the subsequent rise of ISIL have translated into *more* Iranian power in Iraq.

Much of this can be blamed on Iraq's leadership. The American-installed government in Baghdad was ostensibly multi-ethnic and superficially inclusive, but over time Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's governance became more overtly sectarian. Maliki transformed the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) into his personal Shi'a security guard; from 2010 to 2014, the ISF went from being 55 percent Shi'a to 95 percent Shi'a (Powell, 2014).

Sunnis also accused Maliki of allowing Shi'a militant groups like Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq (AAH) to attack his enemies. AAH militants reportedly were allowed to wear military uniforms to disguise their activities (Dehghanpisheh, 2014). Furthermore, the central government lost support from Sunni communities by cracking down brutally on protests. In April 2013, the ISF killed dozens of Sunni protesters in Hawija (Powell, 2014). Shortly thereafter, many Sunni tribal leaders who had been trying to negotiate with Maliki gave up their efforts.

The extent to which Iran was instrumental in encouraging Maliki's sectarian policies remains unclear. However, Tehran's material support of Shi'a militias battling U.S. forces and killing Sunnis no doubt greatly contributed to Iraq's sectarian conflict, paving the way for greater Sunni dissatisfaction and the rise of ISIL.

The Iranian government may see or depict its current fight against ISIL as a continuation of Holy Defense, but it is itself partly responsible for the rise of the extremist group. The Islamic Republic may believe that it is fighting similar threats to the revolution as it did during the Iran-Iraq War, but, in reality, it is engaged in a self-perpetuating fight in Iraq without having a clear solution. The empowerment of the Iraqi Shi'a has resulted in great Iranian influence, but it has also created a potent and potentially long-lasting threat to Iran's interests. Sunni Iraqi attitudes toward Iran have hardened (perhaps beyond repair), while many of the Iraqi Shi'a are suspicious of Iran's intentions. For now, Iran has a strong position in Iraq. But how long will this last?

How Iran Exercises Influence

Since Saddam's fall, the Iranian government has pursued three distinct avenues of influence in Iraqi politics:

1. Promoting its religious influence and propagating *velayat-e faghih*.
2. Positioning itself as the main arbitrator of Iraqi political disputes. Iran helps its various allies gain power through Iraq's political process, then acts to balance them against one another, eventually serving as the power broker to resolve the very disputes that it often played a role in causing (Brennan et al., 2013).
3. Calibrating violent activity among loyal Shi'a militias as a means of pressuring political actors.

Religious Influence

The religious bonds between Iran and Iraq serve an important role in Iran's national security; Iranian security officials have even advocated increasing Iraqi Shi'a feelings of connection to Iran as a means of deterring U.S. military strikes, with the belief that Iraqis would retaliate for attacks on their religious brethren (Slackman, 2006). However, Iran's moral and religious influence over Iraq is not strong as it would like it to be. Thus, Iran's religious policies in Iraq are designed to pull the Shi'a into the Islamic Republic's orbit and away from the influence of the influential clerics in Najaf, such as Ayatollah Ali Sistani, who shuns *velayat-e faghih* and advocates for a religiously pluralistic government (Mamouri, 2014).¹

While there is an underlying sense of affinity among Shi'a Iranians and Iraqis—around 40,000 Iranian pilgrims visit Iraq each month—Iraqis are generally wary of the Islamic Republic's religious and political influence in their country (Eisenstadt, Knights,

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and Ali, 2011). In a 2007 poll, 62 percent of Iraqi Shi'a believed the Iranian government encouraged sectarian violence (Eisenstadt, Knights, and Ali, 2011). In 2010, 48 percent of Iraqi Shi'a expressed a negative view of Iran's ties with Iraqi political leaders (versus 18 percent of Shi'a with positive views; Pollock and Ali, 2010).

For instance, many Iraqis criticized ISCI (formerly known as SCIRI, or the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq) and the Dawa party for siding with Ayatollah Khomeini in the Iran-Iraq War (Felter and Fishman, 2008). To mitigate this perception, SCIRI dropped the reference to the Islamic Revolution in its name in 2007, changing its title to the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq. The group also began highlighting its allegiance to Najaf-based Ayatollah Ali Sistani as a means of gaining local legitimacy (Felter and Fishman, 2008).

It is Sistani's influence in Iraq and beyond that may particularly worry Iran. He is the most revered cleric among the Iraqi Shi'a, and his ties with the Iranian Shi'a have greatly strengthened following the toppling of Saddam and the reinvigorated bonds between Iranians and Iraqis (Slackman, 2006). As of 2006, around 80 percent of the world's Shi'a considered Sistani to be their religious leader, providing him with more than \$700 million per year in religious taxes (Khalaji, 2006).² As of 2011, Sistani was providing stipends to over 65,000 religious students studying in Iran (Eisenstadt, Knights, and Ali, 2011). Tens of thousands of seminary students living in Iran were also receiving health insurance and housing assistance from the ayatollah (Slackman, 2006).

Sistani is active in Iraqi politics, and therefore not a "quietist" cleric who shuns the clergy's role in state affairs. He is also not a fan of *velayat-e faghih*. His religious rulings and political preferences

have a direct impact on not only Iranian influence in Iraq, but also the Islamic Republic's power at home.

Iran is taking great pains to gain religious influence in Iraq as a result of negative Iraqi public opinion and Sistani's influence. Iranian religious foundations and construction firms are actively building religious schools, mosques, and medical clinics in Baghdad, Najaf, and other Shi'a population centers (Eisenstadt, Knights, and Ali, 2011).

In fact, Iran's influence in religious cities had become so ubiquitous in 2009 that Iraq's interior minister banned the use of Farsi signs in Karbala (Dagher, 2009). That same year, the Iraqi Shi'a marched in the streets of Karbala to protest the government's award of \$100 million to an Iranian company to renovate the holy city (Dagher, 2009).

While the Iranian government does not seek to replace Sistani, it is attempting to prop up minor local clerics to lessen his influence—part of preparations to fill the vacuum once the aging ayatollah dies (Wyer, 2012). The low-ranking cleric Seyyed Mohammad Tabatabai is a prime example. As deputy head of the AAH militant group, Tabatabai propagates the regime's ideology in Iraq's seminaries ("Nokhostin Mosaahebe-ye . . .," 2014).

Moreover, Iran appears to be grooming the 65-year-old Iranian Ayatollah Hashemi Shahroudi to take over as Najaf's top ayatollah following Sistani's death (Mamouri, 2014). A former Iraqi-born Iranian judiciary chief and senior leader of SCIRI, Shahroudi is close to Ayatollah Khamenei and may attempt to transform Najaf into a more politically active religious center under the influence of Qom. In October 2011, Shahroudi opened up an office in Najaf, appointing Ibrahim al-Baghdadi as his point man (Hendawi and Abdul-Zahra, 2012). This marked the first time that a high-ranking

Iranian figure close to the regime signaled a plan to move from Qom to Najaf (Al-Kifae, 2012). Shahrudi has been sending Iraqi seminary teachers from Qom to Najaf in preparation for his arrival. He has also attempted to poach Sistani's students by providing higher stipends and better benefits than his rival (Al-Kifae, 2012).

Shahrudi will have a difficult time replicating Sistani's wide following (Arango, 2012). Iran cannot easily determine the succession to Sistani, as his position is not an official one like that of the Supreme Leader. Sistani's high status has been conferred on him by the world's Shi'a, especially senior *maraji* or sources of emulation. Regardless, Sistani does not have a designated successor, and scholars anticipate Najaf coming under more influence from Qom once he dies (Khalaji, 2006). This is particularly due to the widespread state of instability and anxiety in Iraq, especially in Shi'a-inhabited areas. While it may not be able choose a successor to Sistani, Tehran can still use its military and political influence to shape the religious establishment in Iraq, making sure that the cleric who replaces Sistani is more amenable if not subservient to Iranian interests.

Iran, Political Kingmaker and Arbitrator

Iran's policy of maintaining influence in Iraq is to form Shi'a-led centralized governments while making sure they do not become too powerful. Thus, Iranian influence is strong within the central government *and* among non-governmental actors that challenge central authority.

Iran has been adept at taking advantage of Iraq's parliamentary system, in which coalitions are needed to govern. Tehran has benefited from convincing the Shi'a to run on unified lists to take advantage of their demographic strength in Iraqi elections (Eisen-

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stadt, Knights, and Ali, 2011). These lists are invariably dominated by groups close to Iran. In January 2005, for instance, the Shi'a-dominated United Iraqi Alliance (UIA) won the majority of seats in the interim parliament, a body tasked with drafting the country's new constitution. UIA members with long histories of receiving Iranian support, such as ISCI and Dawa, played a determinative role in drafting the document (Felter and Fishman, 2008).

As a result, the Iraqi constitution is favorable to Iran. For instance, it sets the stage for a federalist system by allowing provinces to hold referendums to declare autonomy. Shi'a-majority provinces along the border can therefore distance themselves from Baghdad and become closer to Tehran. Iran's interests also are served through the Accountability and Justice Committee, which vets candidates for elected office and is headed by individuals close to Tehran. It is used frequently to disqualify Sunnis with alleged Baathist pasts (Eisenstadt, Knights, and Ali, 2011). The organization is reminiscent of Iran's Guardian Council, which often prevents individuals and factions from running in elections.

Qods Force commander Qassem Soleimani often acts as a political arbitrator between Iraqi Shi'a parties. He heads all of Iran's activities in Iraq, including overseeing Shi'a militias, disbursing funds to political leaders, and overseeing "soft power" activities (Brennan et al., 2013). With connections to Shi'a, Sunni Arab, and

Kurdish leaders, Soleimani has been directly involved in nearly all major Iraqi government deliberations since the fall of Saddam.

Starting with the January 2005 election for Iraq's interim parliament, Soleimani led the public relations campaign for the pro-Iran bloc, supplying printing presses, political consultants, and broadcast equipment from Iran (Allam, Landay, and Strobel, 2008). During the 2006 dispute over selecting the country's first prime minister under the new constitution, Soleimani snuck into the Green Zone in Baghdad to confer with Iraqi leaders and brokered the deal that brought Nouri al-Maliki to power (Allam, Landay, and Strobel, 2008).

In 2008, Soleimani gained fame in the West for playing the key role in bringing an end to fighting between Muqtada al-Sadr's forces and the Baghdad government. This reportedly came after President Jalal Talabani, a Kurd, secretly met with Soleimani at the Marivan border crossing and pleaded with the Iranian to intercede (Allam, Landay, and Strobel, 2008).

Tehran's influence was on full display in the aftermath of the March 2010 parliamentary elections. Despite Ayad Allawi's Al-Iraqiyya coalition having won a plurality of seats, Allawi was prevented from becoming prime minister due to opposition from a Shi'a coalition supported by Iran and comprised of Nouri al-Maliki's State of Law Alliance and Ibrahim al-Jaafari's Iraqi

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National Alliance (Eisenstadt, Knights, and Ali, 2011). In December 2010, after months of dispute, Iran convinced the Shi'a and Kurds to back Nouri al-Maliki as prime minister. Soleimani reportedly played an instrumental role in brokering the deal (Filkins, 2013).

In 2012, Soleimani's intervention helped defuse tensions between the Iraqi government and the Kurdish Regional Government over Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan's visit to Iraqi Kurdistan (Abdelamir, 2012). Soleimani reportedly escorted Maliki to Tehran for meetings with senior officials, where he was pressured to not escalate the situation by traveling to Erbil.

Most recently, Iran was reported to have played an important role in easing Maliki out of power and replacing him with Haidar al-Abadi as prime minister.

While Iranian officials portray their role in brokering such deals to be a sign of Iraqis' "trust in Iran," it is more likely the result of the regime's role in creating the crises in the first place ("Nokhostin Safir-e . . .," 2014). For example, Iran has been a strong supporter of Sadr's militias, enabling him to challenge the Iraqi government. Referring to inter-Shi'a conflict in Iraq, former U.S. Ambassador to Iraq Ryan Crocker said, "It seems likely that the parties will again trudge to Tehran and ask Qassem Soleimani to sort out the chaos that he has been instrumental in creating and perpetuating" (Gordon, 2012).

The current instability in Iraq gives Iran even more leverage than before. Iraqi Shi'a parties within the central government look to Iran to give them sound military strategy, technical support, weapons, and on-the-ground advisors. In turn, Iran's greater military role enhances its political capabilities. Soleimani is no longer merely responsible for arbitrating Shi'a political disputes, but is becoming the Iraqi government's primary guardian. This does not

mean that Iraq will soon become a new Islamic Republic; however, it does give Iran the chance to become the undisputed political and military power in Shi'a Iraq for the foreseeable future.

Iran's Support for Shi'a Non-Governmental Militias

While helping its allies get elected, Iran simultaneously funds, equips, and even creates militant groups that enable it to pressure political actors to pursue policies beneficial to the Islamic Republic. The more powerful non-state actors grow, the weaker the Iraqi central government becomes. But once a militant group gains enough power to field a viable political party—thus needing to moderate its positions to appeal to a broader constituency—Iran invariably creates a new militant group to replace it (Eisenstadt, Knights, and Ali, 2011).

No one Shi'a group or militia seems to fit all of Iran's needs, necessitating a multitude of groups. For example, the Badr Organization is too embedded in the political system and therefore not reliable as a pure military force, while the Sadrists are too independent and hard to control. Smaller groups, once labeled "Special Groups" by the United States, appear more loyal to Iran than do the Sadrists and the Badrists. These groups, including AAH and Kata'ib Hezbollah, are likely to be the driving force of Iranian policy in Iraq.

There are about 50 Shi'a militias currently operating in Iraq (Smyth, 2014), including many new groups created by Iran following the 2003 U.S. invasion. By 2004, the Qods Force was providing Shi'a militias with weapons, including explosively formed projectiles (EFPs) that accounted for 20 percent of U.S. combat deaths at the time (Filkins, 2013). The Qods Force and Hezbollah have also provided training in Iran for thousands of Shi'a

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militants (Felter and Fishman, 2008). Courses range from 20-day basic paramilitary training to teaching skills for those advancing to leadership positions. Some are also trained to be instructors and are tasked with returning to Iraq and passing their knowledge on to other militants. Today, these Iraqi instructors likely are involved in training the thousands of new Shi'a volunteers who answered Ayatollah Sistani's *fatwa* (religious ruling) to fight against ISIL.

In the Iranian training camps, militiamen are required to take religious and ideological classes to engender loyalty to the Islamic Republic. These ideological classes reportedly achieve varying levels of success, meaning that many militiamen do not necessarily buy into Iran's ideology (Felter and Fishman, 2008). It is also interesting to note that the militants tend to prefer the Hezbollah trainers over those of the IRGC, because of the former's knowledge of Arabic. The Iranian trainers may also display a sense of Persian superiority common among Iranians.

Many Iraqi Shi'a militiamen are more experienced than ISF, having spent years fighting the United States in Iraq and fighting for the Assad regime in Syria (Giovanni, 2014). They tend to follow their own clerical and militant leaders who, to varying extents, receive support from the Islamic Republic.

The diffuse nature of Shi'a militancy is an advantage for Iran—it is difficult for any one group to become large enough to exert independence from the Islamic Republic, which provides

them funding and weaponry. On the front lines in the fight against ISIL, smaller Shi'a militias appear to be folded under the command of more-established militant leaders, such as Badr Organization chief Hadi al-Amiri, to whom Prime Minister Abadi has given responsibility for directing the fight in Diyala province (George, 2014). Amiri is close to the IRGC, especially Soleimani, meaning that Iran is, in effect, directing military operations in Diyala (and elsewhere) in place of the Iraqi government. Both Iran and Amiri appear to have directed the recapture of the city of Tikrit.

Iraqi Shi'a militias are often reported to be engaged in extrajudicial killings, kidnapping, and torture of Sunni Iraqis. They may appear reliable for Iran's fight against ISIL, but their sectarian nature and abuses against the Sunni are increasing ISIL's ideological and political appeal among the Sunni. Iran faces a major quandary, as it is unlikely to fully defeat Sunni extremist groups in Iraq as long as it bases its influence on Shi'a militants. But the weakening of Shi'a militias is likely to result in a strengthened Iraqi central government that could pose a long-term challenge to Iranian influence.

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Badr Organization

The Badr Organization is a core component of Iran's fight against ISIL, as it has the longest-running ties to the Islamic Republic among Iraqi Shi'a groups. An armed wing of SCIRI, the then-named Badr Corps fought alongside the IRGC in the Iran-Iraq War. Current Badr leader Hadi al-Amiri served with Qassem Soleimani on the front lines of that war (Brennan et al., 2013). Amiri is reported to have dual Iraqi-Iranian citizenship and is married to an Iranian (Karami, 2014a). It has also been noted that Amiri's uniform resembles that of the IRGC more than that of the Iraqi army (Dehghanpisheh, 2014).

SCIRI became integrated into the new Iraqi government and changed its name to ISCI following the U.S. invasion of Iraq. As part of this integration, the Badr Corps was dissolved in 2003 and thousands of its militants were incorporated into the Iraqi army, police, and security forces (Eisenstadt, Knights, and Ali, 2011). Meanwhile, ISCI's involvement in politics prompted Iran to look to new groups to engage in the violent activities it deemed necessary to counter U.S. forces (Brennan et al., 2013).

Over time, differences arose within ISCI and, by 2010, ISCI and the Badr Organization were acting as separate, yet allied, political organizations.³ ISCI has come to be seen as more independent from Iran than Badr, which does not diverge from Iran's leadership (Brennan et al., 2013), and ISCI now operates its own militant group, the Ashura Brigades (Smyth, 2014).

The Badr Organization continues to be influential in the Iraqi government. Prime Minister Abadi appointed Badr member Mohammad al-Ghabban as interior minister, giving him control over the police force and intelligence services (AFP, 2014). Mean-

while, Hadi al-Amiri and his approximately 15,000 fighters are playing a leading role in the fight against ISIL (Dehghanpisheh, 2014). Since 2004, the Badr Organization has been operating an Islamic Cultural Center, which seeks to train Iraqi youth in the Islamic Republic's ideology. The center is headquartered in Baghdad with branches in other Shi'a cities ("Mabna-ye Razmandegaan-e . . . , " 2014).

Sadrists

Iran has a complicated relationship with Muqtada al-Sadr, whom it sees as too independent-minded (Brennan et al., 2013). For instance, Iran was frustrated with Sadr's shifting support for Maliki (Stanford University, 2014b). He also portrays himself as a nationalist, criticizing Iranian interference in Iraq while still receiving funding from Tehran (Eisenstadt, Knights, and Ali, 2011). Also, as opposed to the Badr leaders, Sadr does not express allegiance to Ayatollah Khamenei, with Sadrism websites declaring Sadr himself as their religious leader (Visser, 2011).

Nevertheless, Iran has found it necessary to work with Sadr, as he has a popular support base that groups like Badr—which are seen as tied to Iran—do not. In 2003, with Hezbollah's help, Sadr established the Jaish al-Mahdi (JAM) militant group to fight U.S. forces (Stanford University, 2014b). By 2004, the Qods Force was providing JAM with arms and training (Brennan et al., 2013). In addition to help from Iran, JAM funded itself through theft, weapons trafficking, and extortion (Stanford University, 2014b). JAM would eventually swell to around 15,000 fighters (mostly Iraqi), and would be heavily involved in the sectarian war that erupted in 2006, embarking on a process of ethnically cleansing Baghdad neighborhoods of Sunnis (Stanford University, 2014b).

In April 2003, the Iranian Ayatollah Kazem Haeri named Muqtada al-Sadr as his representative in Iraq. Some saw this as an Iranian attempt to co-opt Sadr (Felter and Fishman, 2008). This strategy appears to have paid off in 2007, when Sadr—in an effort to gain religious legitimacy—chose to study in the Qom seminary rather than Najaf (Stanford University, 2014b). Sadr stayed in Iran from 2008 to 2011, fleeing a crackdown by Maliki and the Badrists (Stanford University, 2014b).

While in Iran, he decided to restructure his organization to focus on social services that were not being adequately provided by the government—a strategy akin to Hezbollah's in Lebanon. Transforming most of his militia into the Mumahidoon, Sadr began providing services, such as Koranic lessons, urban reconstruction, and trash collection (Stanford University, 2014b). However, he maintained a core number of around 5,000 fighters, calling them the Promised Day Brigade (Brennan et al., 2013).

Meanwhile, militants who were angered over Sadr's attempts to reconcile with Maliki and the Badrists splintered off into several violent Special Groups (Stanford University, 2014b). Seeing the splintering of JAM as an opportunity to gain leverage over Sadr, Iran had Lebanese Hezbollah train these new militant organizations (Rahimi, 2010; Brennan et al., 2013).

Muqtada al-Sadr now operates a militant group called the Peace Brigades, which made its first public appearance in June 2014 after the fall of Mosul to ISIL (Chulov, 2014). Peace Brigade commanders attempt to portray themselves as defenders of all Iraqis, not just the Shi'a (Siegel, 2014). Originally focusing on defending Shi'a shrines, they have moved into Sunni areas in Anbar province. In November 2014, 200 members of the Peace Brigades participated in an attack against ISIL in the town of Heet in Anbar

(Habib, 2014). They, along with other Shi'a militant groups, had been invited into Anbar by the Sunni Albu Nimr tribe.

Like other Shi'a militant groups, the Peace Brigades participate in joint operations coordinated by the IRGC and Badr Organization. These included the liberation of the Sunni town of Jurf al-Sakhar. Iranian media, however, tend to highlight the role of the Badr Organization and AAH over that of the Peace Brigades, perhaps due to Iran's ambivalence for Muqtada al-Sadr.

Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq

AAH splintered off from JAM in 2006. Iran chose Sadr's rival, Qais al-Khazali, to head the group, and had senior Hezbollah operative Ali Musa Daqduq assume control of its training (Brennan et al., 2013). The U.S. government refers to AAH as a "direct-action" arm of the Qods Force (Brennan et al., 2013). Of all the Shi'a militant groups, AAH seems most similar to Lebanese Hezbollah in both its loyalty to the Islamic Republic and the importance it places on providing a wide range of social services that serve as a means of disseminating its pro-Iranian ideology.

As opposed to the Sadrists, AAH is unfailingly loyal to the Islamic Republic. It expresses devotion to Ayatollah Khamenei and promotes the ideology of *velayat-e faghih*. AAH members are also followers of ayatollahs Hashemi Shahroudi and Kazem Haeri ("Nokhostin Mosaabebe-ye . . .", 2014). In return, AAH receives between a reported \$1.5 and \$2 million per month from Iran to fund anywhere between 5,000 to 10,000 fighters (Dehghanpisheh, 2014; Morris, 2014; Stanford University, 2014a). A mark of the trust that Iran places in AAH is that AAH is given more autonomy to plan its own operations than is given to other Qods Force-

Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq is unfailingly loyal to the Islamic Republic.

affiliated militias (Dehghanpisheh, 2014; Morris, 2014; Stanford University, 2014a).

To compete with Sadr, AAH has attempted to portray itself as a nationalist Islamic group interested in protecting all Iraqis (Wyer, 2012). In December 2011, Khazali announced AAH's decision to participate in the political process (Wyer, 2012), and it won several seats in the 2014 parliamentary elections as the Al-Sadiqun Bloc (Stanford University, 2014a). Maliki welcomed AAH's entrance into politics as a counterweight to Sadr, and included it in his State of Law Coalition (Sly, 2013). Some Iraqi media outlets accused Maliki of providing security for AAH leaders as they travelled around the country (Wyer, 2012).

Since 2013, the group's political branches also have provided social services, including aid to orphans and widows (Stanford University, 2014a). It runs a network of madrasas called "Seal of the Apostles," which promotes the Islamic Republic's ideology (Wyer, 2012). It has also established a Department of Religious Schools in Najaf tasked with recruiting young clerics (Wyer, 2012). AAH broadcasts its political messages through Friday prayer sermons at the Sabatayn Mosque in Baghdad and the Abdullah al Radiya Mosque in Diyala (Stanford University, 2014a).

Thus far, AAH's ultimate objective appears to be spreading Iran's *velayat-e faghih* to Iraq (Wyer, 2012). It is critical of Ayatollah Sistani and the "silent marja" in Najaf (Wyer, 2012), and, as opposed to the Sadrists, AAH has openly supported Iran's involvement in Iraq. In a November 2014 interview, AAH's representative

in Iran praised the Islamic Republic's efforts to train Iraqis to fight for themselves, just like Iran has "trained the people of Gaza to defend themselves" ("Namayande-ye Gorouh-e . . .," 2014).

At the same time, AAH makes efforts to reach out to ethnic and religious minorities, and says that it is fighting ISIL to defend all Iraqis ("Nokhostin Mosaahebe-ye . . .," 2014). AAH officials claim that it began training Sunni tribes in 2012 and that these groups are now fighting alongside the Shi'a groups ("Namayande-ye Gorouh-e . . .," 2014). However, AAH officials' references to the "Shi'a government in Iraq" and its engagement in targeted killings in response to bombings of Shi'a targets threaten to undermine their efforts ("Nokhostin Mosaahebe-ye . . .," 2014).

Kata'ib Hezbollah

Another Special Group that splintered off from JAM is Kata'ib Hezbollah, which was established by the Qods Force in early 2007. Along with AAH, the U.S. considers Kata'ib Hezbollah a "direct action" arm of the IRGC (Brennan et al., 2013). This secretive group has around 3,000 fighters who are highly loyal to Ayatollah Khamenei (Dehghanpisheh, 2014). Although smaller than other militant groups, Kata'ib Hezbollah is considered highly skillful and is trusted with Iran's most sensitive weaponry (Giovanni, 2014). In addition to its core fighters, Kata'ib Hezbollah oversees Popular Defense Companies comprised of recruits who answered Ayatollah Sistani's *fatwa* to fight ISIL (Smyth, 2014). The organization appears to be involved solely in militant activities, as opposed to AAH, which also provides social services.

The organization is led by Jamal al-Ibrahimi (aka Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis), who has a long history of affiliation with the leaders of the Badr Organization and is a close advisor to Qassem Solei-

mani (Dehghanpisheh, 2014). He is reported to have acted as a liaison between Soleimani and Prime Minister Maliki. Ibrahimi's family reportedly lives in Iran (Dehghanpisheh, 2014).

The Rise of ISIL: Implications for Iran

Short- to Medium-Term Gains

The conquest of Mosul and much of Anbar province by ISIL and the poor performance of Iraqi armed forces have made the Iraqi Shi'a more reliant on Iran. Short of reliable conventional troops, the Iraqi government has leaned on Shi'a militias with close ties to Iran to protect Baghdad and stop ISIL's onslaught. The IRGC has been more than happy to oblige. Iraq's dependence on Iran can facilitate the latter's foreign policy objectives, from decreasing Tehran's international isolation to possibly gaining more leverage on nuclear negotiation. Therefore, it is not surprising that the IRGC's involvement in Iraq has become more public than it was during the U.S. occupation (2003–2011).

Qassem Soleimani was in the shadows during that period; the IRGC had a minimal physical presence in Iraq, and instead trained Iraqis on Iranian territory and supplied some of the most sophisticated weapons used by Shi'a militias against American forces. Iranian officials were denying Soleimani's presence in Iraq as recently as July 2014—likely out of concern of alienating Sunni Arabs (Adelkah, 2014).

Iran no longer stays away from the limelight in the fight against ISIL. By the fall of 2014, Soleimani had been transformed

Iran no longer stays away from the limelight in the fight against ISIL.

into a public hero. AAH openly praised his role in uniting the “resistance forces” (“Namayande-ye Gorouh-e . . . ,” 2014). Furthermore, Iranian news sites have highlighted the IRGC’s active role on the front lines. One such instance was the defense of Amerli in October, in which the IRGC sent helicopters into the besieged town to arm and train the locals (“Sepah-e Pasdaran . . . ,” 2014).

Qassem Soleimani’s photos were also prominently displayed in the aftermath of the liberation of Jurf al-Sakhar, in which 15,000 fighters—mostly Iraqi Shi’a—took part (“Sepah-e Pasdaran . . . ,” 2014). The battle for Jurf al-Sakhar showcased the growing role of Iranian-backed Shi’a militias in liberating strategic Iraqi territory from ISIL. While many Shi’a militias conduct extrajudicial killing of Sunnis and other abuses, the Shi’a militia fighting in Jurf al-Sakhar cooperated with Sunni tribes in recapturing the city. Shortly after the operations, a member of the Badr Organization told reporters, “With Iran’s help, and without any involvement from the international coalition, we were able to achieve big victories against Daesh [ISIL]” (Ozv-e Sazmaan-e . . . ,” 2014). In late November, Iran made global headlines when its air force bombed ISIL targets in Diyala province, in defense of what Iranian officials describe as a 25-mile buffer zone in Iraq (Arango and Erdbrink, 2014).

While the military effectiveness of Iranian airstrikes is unclear, it is more likely that the sorties were intended to bolster the perception that Iran is doing more to protect the Iraqis than the United States is.

There are a couple possible explanations for Iran’s increasingly public role in Iraq. First, the Iranian government is keen to prove its reliability to Iraq’s Shi’a-led government. For example, while the military effectiveness of Iranian airstrikes is unclear, it is more likely that the sorties were intended to bolster the perception that Iran is doing more to protect the Iraqis than the United States is (Pollack, 2014).

Washington and Tehran still compete for influence in Iraq despite the U.S. troop withdrawal; most concerning for Iran, the rise of ISIL could provide an opportunity for U.S. forces to return to Iraq and supplant Iran’s presence. Currently, there are approximately 3,000 American troops in Iraq, a number that might increase in the future. Iran may not have an advanced air force or intelligence, reconnaissance, and surveillance capabilities, but it does possess a distinct advantage over U.S. forces: It is more willing to commit ground troops in Iraq and work directly with Shi’a militias that are considered more effective than Iraq’s regular armed forces, but often commit human rights abuses and are therefore problematic partners for the United States.

Iran was quick to respond to the fall of Mosul; it began sending advisors and weapons to its neighbor within 48 hours of ISIL taking over the city (Daragahi et al., 2014). The United States, on the other hand, did not begin airstrikes until two months later. This has not gone unnoticed by the Iraqis. In a television interview, Prime Minister Abadi said, “When Baghdad was threatened, the Iranians did not hesitate to help us, and did not hesitate to help the Kurds when Erbil was threatened . . . unlike the Americans, who hesitated to help us when Baghdad was in danger, and hesitated to help our security forces” (Arango and Erdbrink, 2014).

Second, Iran's active and explicit involvement in Iraq is a boon for the Rouhani government's efforts to decrease Iran's isolation, enhance its regional influence, and strengthen its partnership with global powers.⁴ Rouhani seeks to rectify his predecessor's costly foreign policies; former President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad helped isolate Iran regionally and internationally, and is viewed by the centrist camp in Iran as expanding Saudi and Turkish influence at Iran's expense.

Iran's decisive role in Iraq can demonstrate to the rest of the Middle East that its power exceeds that of Sunni states, which are unable to save the Iraqi government from ISIL. This is particularly useful in swaying smaller Sunni states (Oman being a good example) that may be suspicious of Iran to see the Islamic Republic as a necessary balance against Saudi Arabia.

Perhaps more importantly, Iran's fight against ISIL may provide it additional leverage in the nuclear negotiations with the P5+1. The U.S. government has stated that its negotiations with Iran are focused solely on latter's nuclear program and are not dependent on regional issues. Such compartmentalization can theoretically prevent greater Iranian leverage on nuclear negotiations. Tehran is unable to ease the sanctions chokehold without addressing P5+1—especially American—concerns over its nuclear program.

But Iran's regional influence is not as easily contained by sanctions; Tehran can act independently and counter to American and Western interests in the Middle East despite the ongoing negotiations. Iran's ability to destabilize (or stabilize) the region could convince the United States and its P5+1 interlocutors to be more flexible on the nuclear issue. There are, however, no indications this has been the case, despite suspicions that Washington and Tehran

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may be eyeing cooperation in Iraq in the future (Solomon and Lee, 2014).

But even if Iran's regional policy does not provide it more leverage on nuclear negotiations, its enhanced regional position can prove beneficial after a final nuclear deal, or even in its absence. The United States is likely to be wary of engaging Iran politically and economically after a deal, but the same attitude does not apply to European and Asian powers.

Many European and Asian countries are eager to return to the Iranian market and resume commercial and business relations that existed prior to the Ahmadinejad years. China and Japan view Iran as an important long-term provider of energy; in particular, Beijing sees Iran as a counter to American interests in the Middle East and potential geopolitical and security partner. The Europeans and Chinese are worried about instability in the Middle East, and see Iran as a potential bulwark against ISIL.

More regional influence for Iran can help it expand ties with global powers (if not the United States) after a nuclear deal. But if negotiations fail, Iran could also use its regional influence to undermine sanctions by forging closer ties to economic powers such as China, although perhaps not as successfully as some Iranian officials may assume.

Long-Term Risks

ISIL appears to present more opportunities than threats for Iran. But Tehran's public involvement in Iraq can also weaken its long-term interests in the Middle East. Iran's ongoing rivalry with Saudi Arabia and the Gulf Cooperation Council has been costly, especially in economic terms (Vardi, 2015). In addition, the Islamic Republic has traditionally benefited by presenting itself as a pan-Islamic force in the Middle East. Iran's predominant Persian and Shi'a characteristics make it unique in the predominantly Sunni region. To gain and maintain influence, Iran has to appeal to the Sunni masses as well as the Shi'a Arab populations. Anti-Americanism and anti-Zionism are therefore useful features of Iranian foreign policy, as they make the Islamic Republic more appealing to the region's Sunni Arabs.

But Iran is increasingly viewed these days as a primarily sectarian actor in the region, and its anti-American and anti-Israeli policies no longer have the same cachet (Zogby, 2014). Whereas traditional Sunni groups, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, may have been more open to working with Iran in the past, groups such as al Qaeda, the Nusra Front, and ISIL view Shi'a Iran in starkly black-and-white sectarian terms. This is due, in part, to the rise of Salafist and Takfiri Sunni Islam in the Middle East.

However, Iran's own expanding influence and backing of distinctly Shi'a groups has contributed to the rise of Sunni jihadi Islam, and Iran's influence among the Sunni has declined as it has gained more influence in Shi'a-dominated areas. A good example is Iran's expanding influence via Hezbollah.

Hezbollah's 2006 war with Israel proved that it was a capable and well-organized fighting force, enhancing its popularity across

the Middle East. The Lebanese party based its legitimacy in Lebanon on its resistance to Israel; while it gained the loyalty of the Lebanese Shi'a through its political and social activism, it was able to justify its military strength to Lebanon's Sunnis (and other religious denominations) by championing the Palestinian cause and standing up to Israel's military might.

Iran's reputation among the Sunni grew as well, as many viewed Hezbollah as an Iranian proxy force, therefore proving Iran's value as an anti-American and anti-Israeli force. But, over time, Iran's ascendance created a backlash among the Sunni. Major powers such as Saudi Arabia became more suspicious of Hezbollah and Iran after 2006; Hezbollah's subsequent consolidation of political and military power in Lebanon came at the expense of Saudi-backed Sunni parties. This, combined with the rise of Shi'a parties in Iraq, was viewed as an intolerable expansion of Iranian power in the Sunni world.

The Syrian civil war has perhaps proven to be the biggest blow to Iranian influence among the Sunni. The largely Sunni revolt against the Alawite-dominated Assad regime has been brutally suppressed with Iran's and Hezbollah's active intervention in the conflict. While Iran's backing of the Assad regime is not entirely motivated by sectarianism—the Iranian regime does not necessarily view the Alawites as its Shi'a brethren, but as a useful geopoliti-

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cal ally—the region’s Sunnis see Iran as being driven by sectarian considerations.

Iran’s strong support for Shi’a militias may enhance its influence in Shi’a regions, but is likely to weaken its position among the most powerful states, especially Saudi Arabia. Iran’s overt involvement in the fight against ISIL has reinforced the Sunni narrative of Iran as a sectarian actor. It has been argued that ISIL poses a threat to Iran and Saudi Arabia alike and that both countries should explore joint cooperation against the group. But the Saudis tend to view Iran as a much bigger threat than ISIL. Working with Tehran against ISIL may weaken the latter, but strengthen the former. Moreover, Riyadh views Tehran as dedicated to a Shi’a sectarian agenda; in the event of ISIL’s defeat, Tehran is likely to continue if not strengthen its support for Shi’a groups viewed as hostile by Saudi Arabia.

Iran’s role in fighting ISIL in Iraq undermines its own pan-Islamist credentials and weakens its influence among the Sunni, especially as Iran favors the Iraqi Shi’a and works with Shi’a militias often accused of abusing the Sunni. Major Sunni powers, such as Saudi Arabia and Turkey, are likely to view Iran’s increasingly overt intervention in Iraq as a reason to increase support for Sunni insurgents, whether they be extremist Sunni jihadists, less-fanatical Salafists, or even Arab nationalists. In addition, Saudi Arabia’s energy policies and Turkey’s overall trade ties with Iran have a direct bearing on the Iranian economy. While Iran may be able to counter Sunni power through sectarian policies, it is likely to hurt its long-standing position in a Sunni-majority Middle East.

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Is There Room for Cooperation Between the United States and Iran?

The rise of ISIL has led to a debate in the United States regarding the utility and dangers of working with Iran in Iraq. Some commentators and analysts argue that Washington and Tehran should work together against ISIL (see Pillar, 2014), while others believe that the Iranian government is a major source of problems in Iraq (see Haykel, 2014; and Pletka, 2015). A closer examination of the issue reveals that American and Iranian interests in Iraq are not completely aligned, especially due to the Iranian government’s distrust of the United States and its commitment to a rivalry between the two nations. However, the two countries can still work together in pushing back ISIL from Iraqi territory. While their visions for Iraq and the region diverge, the current objective of both the United States and Iran is to diminish ISIL. Greater U.S.-Iran coordination could assist in achieving this goal.

Tactical cooperation in Iraq may, however, not lead to greater détente. Iranian and American politics—in addition to opposition from U.S. allies, such as Israel and Saudi Arabia—is likely to make broader U.S.-Iran cooperation problematic. The Iranian government appears to be of two minds in considering cooperation with Washington in Iraq. Rouhani government officials have advocated

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working with the United States in Iraq, but Iran's most powerful leaders have opposed the idea in public. More often than not, Iranian officials and their Shi'a Arab allies blame the United States and the Sunni Arab states for the rise of ISIL. While some officials appear to believe that the ISIL takeover of Iraq was an unintended consequence of misguided support for Sunni jihadists in Syria, others, including Ayatollah Khamenei, have argued that the United States directly facilitated the group's expansion in Iraq to compensate for its lack of success in manipulating Iraqi politics ("Tahlile Rahbare . . .," 2014).

Hassan Qassemi-Qomi, Iran's former ambassador to Iraq, has said that the current situation in Iraq is "America's revenge for its defeat in the region" ("Nokhostin Safir-e . . .," 2014). AAH leader Qais al-Khazali has warned that the United States intends to pit Iraqi Muslims against each other in an attempt to divide the country ("Dabir Kol-e . . .," 2014). In an interview with Iranian reporters, AAH deputy Seyyed Mohammad Tabatabai claimed that bombings in Baghdad and other Iraqi cities were part of this U.S. "conspiracy" ("Nokhostin Mosaabehe-ye . . .," 2014). He also

threatened that AAH would target all Americans in Iraq except for those who are part of the U.S. embassy ("Nokhostin Mosaabehe-ye . . .," 2014). According to U.S. intelligence officials, however, Iran has ordered militias to not target Americans in Iraq (Lake, 2014).

Iranian leaders and their Shi'a allies may genuinely believe their own rhetoric, but even if they don't, working directly and explicitly with the United States carries risks. Khamenei may be willing to allow cooperation with America on "specific" issues, but he does not appear to believe that Iran will get much in return (Ganji, 2013). Theoretically, Iran might help the United States defeat ISIL but then see Washington turn to what the Islamic Republic sees as being traditional anti-Iranian policies.

Despite Khamenei's purported reluctance, the United States may have good reasons to work with Iran. The resolution of the nuclear dispute presents opportunities for cooperation between the two rivals (Nader, 2014). The Rouhani government, relatively non-ideological and pragmatic, may serve as a useful interlocutor. But Washington should not overestimate the chances of success and underestimate the pitfalls of engagement. While appealing on some levels, working with Iran in Iraq militarily may strengthen American national security interests, but only in limited ways, such as breaking ISIL's hold over certain parts of Iraq (e.g., Diyala).

Iran and the United States may face the same foe, but the rise of ISIL is partly due to Iran's sectarian policies in Iraq. To be fair, Iran is not the main reason for ISIL's rise; that can be attributed to a number of other factors, including the prevalence of Sunni jihadi ideology after the fall of Saddam, weak central control over Iraq, ISIL's use of Syria as a sanctuary, and the Shi'a-led government's own behavior.

But Iran's sectarian policies in Iraq contribute to Sunni dissatisfaction and the empowerment of radical groups like ISIL. Iran's favoring of Shi'a political parties and militias is viewed by Sunnis as a broader campaign of disenfranchisement and marginalization. It is doubtful that the Iranian government, even under President Rouhani, would pursue policies that favor the U.S. objective of achieving a more inclusive and non-sectarian Iraqi government. Iran's policy toward Iraq appears to be under the tight control of the IRGC, which operates through Shi'a Iraqi militias. Furthermore, while the Rouhani government may see Iraq as a potential step for détente with Washington, the IRGC is still committed to the rivalry with the United States. According to IRGC chief commander General Mohammad Ali Jafari, Iran's "defensive and military capabilities" are its source of power, rather than Rouhani's negotiations with the United States (Karami, 2014b).

Moreover, explicit cooperation between the United States and Iran would cause anxiety among America's allies, especially Saudi Arabia, and complicate U.S. policy on nuclear negotiations. The U.S. Congress is also likely to assiduously oppose U.S.-Iran rapprochement. Explicit U.S.-Iran cooperation before a nuclear accord is not recommendable; even cooperation after a deal could prove to be problematic.

While the Rouhani government may see Iraq as a potential step for détente with Washington, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps is still committed to the rivalry with the United States.

This is not to say that the United States can completely ignore or contain Iran's role in the Middle East. Tehran is a decisive actor in the region, whether in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, or Yemen. Active U.S. efforts to counter Iranian influence in Iraq must contend with realities on the ground. Tehran wields influence there in ways unmatched by the United States, and its oversized role in Iraqi politics and governance is unlikely to end any time soon. U.S. efforts to find a political solution to the multiple crises roiling the region must take Iranian influence into account. While the United States may find broad cooperation with Iran to be problematic, it nevertheless should explore discreet political agreements with Iran. Such agreements should be aimed not to fundamentally change the relationship with Iran, but help find ways to defuse and deescalate sectarian-driven warfare in Iraq, Syria, and the wider Middle East.

For example, the United States is unlikely to end Iranian influence among the Iraqi Shi'a, but it may find ways to incentivize greater Sunni involvement in Iraqi politics by applying greater pressure on Baghdad to act as a non-sectarian government. Washington could also convince Tehran to decrease its support for Shi'a militias if it demonstrates that Iranian interests in Iraq would be protected.

The same logic applies to other cases. For example, Washington cannot force Tehran to abandon the Alawite-led regime in Syria, but Tehran might be willing to accept a political settlement as long as its interests are protected, even if Bashar al Assad is forced to step down. This means that any future government in Syria would be dominated by or include elements closely linked to Tehran.

The Rouhani government is a promising interlocutor in this effort, as it may view armed intervention in neighboring countries as counterproductive to decreasing Iran's isolation. Nevertheless,

the United States must contend with the decisive power wielded by Khamenei and the IRGC over Iran's foreign policies. U.S. engagement with Iran in Iraq is likely to be more successful if Rouhani is empowered by a nuclear deal or if the Khamenei/IRGC-led establishment is greatly weakened by unforeseen events.

But a nuclear deal is not guaranteed to lead to fundamental changes in Iran, and Rouhani is unlikely to have the will or power to make dramatic changes to Iranian policy (Nader, 2014). Therefore, U.S. policy toward Iran should not be based on normalization of relations or alliance-building, as the two countries are likely to remain rivals for years, but instead should focus on finding spaces in which the two countries can tolerate each other's respective influence while striving for some modicum of regional stability.

Admittedly, this is a tall order. U.S.-Iran relations are mainly characterized by distrust; the thought of even the smallest sign of cooperation between Washington and Tehran often leads to strong emotional and political reactions not only in Washington and Tehran, but in Tel Aviv and Riyadh as well. Nevertheless, the United

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States possesses enough political, economic, and military power that it can engage a smaller power like Iran without endangering its own long-term interests. Political engagement with Iran need not be a sign of weakness and desperation, but a component of a U.S. policy that not only takes into account the interests of allied nations, but seeks to explore possibilities with rivals as well.

Notes

¹ Although Sistani was once considered to be a “quietist,” or a cleric who shuns politics, he has in fact been quite active in Iraqi politics since 2003.

² At the same time, Sistani’s increased reliance on revenue from inside Iran does provide the Islamic Republic with potential leverage over him.

³ In 2003, differences began to arise within ISCI over who would succeed Muhammad Baqir al-Hakim as the group’s leader and how close it would remain to Iran. In 2007, the group’s new leader—Abd al-Aziz al-Hakim—indicated that ISCI would increase ties with clerics in Najaf. ISCI has come to be seen as relatively more independent from Iran. For instance, in the 2010 parliamentary elections, ISCI backed Ayad Allawi over Iranian favorite Maliki. On the other hand, Badr leader Hadi al-Amiri backed Maliki.

⁴ The Revolutionary Guards’ public intervention in Iraq can also strengthen its own domestic interests by burnishing its legitimacy at home. It may also serve the military or political aspirations of Guards commanders, such as Soleimani. There have been rumors in Iranian media that Soleimani’s new high profile is due to him being groomed to head the Revolutionary Guards. He may also seek political office in the future.

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